

Other Religions ► Alternative Religions

Deism: Belief in a Perfect God Who Does Not Intervene

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Updated on March 26, 2018

The term *deism* refers not to a specific religion but rather to a particular perspective on the nature of God. Deists believe that a single creator god does exist, but they take their evidence from reason and logic, not the revelatory acts and miracles that form the basis of faith in many organized religions. Deists hold that after the motions of the universe were set in place, God retreated and had no further interaction with the created universe or the beings within it. Deism is sometimes considered to be a reaction against *theism* in its various forms—the belief in a God that does intervene in the lives of humans and with whom you can have a personal relationship.

Deists, therefore, break with followers of other major theistic religions in a number of important ways:

- **Rejection of prophets.** Because God has no desire or need for worship or other specific behavior on the part of followers, there is no reason to think that he speaks through prophets or sends his representatives to live among humanity.
- **Rejection of supernatural events.** In his wisdom, God created all of the desired motions of the universe during creation. There is, therefore, no

need for him to make mid-course corrections by granting visions, performing miracles and other supernatural acts.

- **Rejection of ceremony and ritual.** In its early origins, deism rejected what it saw as the artificial pomp of the ceremonies and rituals of organized religion. Deists favor a natural religion that almost resembles primitive monotheism in the freshness and immediacy of its practice. For deists, belief in God is not a matter of faith or suspension of disbelief, but a common-sense conclusion based on the evidence of the senses and reason.

Methods of Understanding God

Because deists do not believe that God manifests himself directly, they believe that he can only be understood through the application of reason and through the study of the universe he created. Deists have a fairly positive view of human existence, stressing the greatness of creation and the natural faculties granted to humanity, such as the ability to reason. For this reason, deists largely reject all forms of revealed religion. Deists believe that any knowledge one has of God should come through your own understanding, experiences, and reason, not the prophecies of others.

Deist Views of Organized Religions

Because deists accept that God is uninterested in praise and that he is unapproachable via prayer, there is little need for the traditional trappings of organized religion. In fact, deists take a rather dim view of traditional religion, feeling that it distorts a real understanding of God. Historically, however, some original deists found value in organized religion for common people, feeling that it could instill positive concepts of morality and sense of community.

Origins of Deism

Deism originated as an intellectual movement during the Ages of Reason and Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries in France, Britain, Germany, and the United States. Early champions of deism were typically Christians who found the supernatural aspects of their religion to be at odds with their growing belief in the supremacy of reason. During this time, many people became interested in scientific explanations about the world and became more skeptical of the magic and miracles represented by traditional religion.

In Europe, a large number of well-known intellectuals proudly thought of themselves as deists, including John Leland, Thomas Hobbes, Anthony Collins, Pierre Bayle, and Voltaire.

A large number of United States' early founding fathers were deists or had strong deist leanings. Some of them identified themselves as Unitarians—a non-Trinitarian form of Christianity that emphasized rationality and skepticism. These deists include Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, James Madison, and John Adams.

Deism Today

Deism declined as an intellectual movement beginning about 1800, not because it was rejected outright, but because many of its principles were adopted or accepted by mainstream religious thought. Unitarianism as it is practiced today for example holds many principles that are entirely

practical reality, for example, holds many principles that are entirely consistent with the deism of the 18th century. Many branches of modern Christianity have made room for a more abstract view of God that emphasized a transpersonal, rather than personal, relationship to the deity.

Those who define themselves as deists remain a small part of the overall religious community in the U.S., but it is a segment that is thought to be growing. The 2001 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), determined that deism between 1990 and 2001 grew at a rate of 717 percent. There are currently thought to be about 49,000 self-declared deists in the U.S., but there are likely many, many more people who hold beliefs that are consistent with deism, though they might not define themselves that way.

The origin of deism was a religious manifestation of the social and cultural trends born in Age of Reason and Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, and like those movements, it continues to influence culture to this day.

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What Do You Think?



How often do you currently attend services at a faith-based organization?

- ☐ Several times per week
- ☐ Several times per month
- ☐ Several times per year
- ☐ Less often than that
- ☐ I never attend religious services
- ☐ Other / Does not apply

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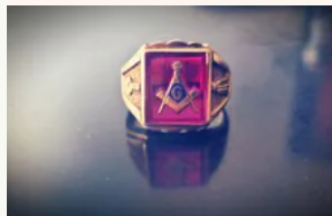
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